DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 341 200 EC 300 873

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TITLE African-American Males Experiencing School Failure: Alternative Self-Concept Model for Special Educators.
PUB DATE 11 Nov 91
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Council for Exceptional Children's Topical Conference on At-Risk Children and Youth (New Orleans, LA, November 10-12, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Students; *Dropout Prevention; Elementary Secondary Education; *High Risk Students; Individual Development; Interpersonal Competence; *Intervention; *Males; Self Control; *Self Esteem; Self Evaluation (Individuals)
IDENTIFIERS African Americans

ABSTRACT

This paper describes Project Self-Responsibility, an innovative approach to reaching African-American male at-risk students and helping them become more self responsible, self determined, self reliant, and self productive. This 1-year project involved 32 students from 1 elementary and 2 high schools in Chattanooga, Tennessee. The project utilized an "operational" self concept model. Key techniques of the project included direct teaching, modifying the environment, employing intrinsic motivation, and helping to put failure in perspective. A questionnaire with 24 open-ended questions addressing self knowledge, self esteem, and self ideal was administered. Results indicated that no project student dropped out of school during the year and that students improved in decision making skills, self knowledge, responsibility, and social attitudes. Includes 32 references. (DB)

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African-American Males Experiencing School Failure: Alternative Self-Concept Model for Special Educators

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EC 300873

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Abstract

African-American males confront a myriad of problems in school programs and the mainstream society. Justifiably so, they have been regarded of late as endangered species. The response to their multidimensional problems has been in the way of reports and studies which have tended to blame the victim. These reports have stressed excellence and quality in education with little response to equity and inclusiveness. In the midst of this transition are cries and yearnings for practical programs tailored to meet the special needs of African-American male at-risk students. Though successes have not been very apparent, we are beginning to witness new ideas and programs. Project Self-Responsibility, the project presented in this paper, is one of such innovative nontraditional techniques to reach African-American male at-risk students. In this particular project, thirty-two students from three area schools were involved in the use of the "operational" self-concept model for retention and graduation purposes. Results and implications of this project to special educators and other practitioners are discussed in this paper.

African-American Males Experiencing School Failure:
Alternative Self-Concept Model for Special Educators

Education, historically, has been called to effectively respond to social, economic, cultural and political problems (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986; Committee for Economic Development, 1985; Holmes Group, 1988; National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983). Unfortunately, schools have not fully pursued African-American courses to the greatest possible extent. It is no wonder that reforms and reports repeatedly come in different ways without respect for circumstances and "real" solutions. With this situation in perspective, Cuban (1990) questioned:

> Are we attacking the right problem? Have the policies we adopted fit the problem? Have practitioners implemented the policies as intended? ... Right problems, wrong solutions? or vice versa? Are we dealing with the problem or the politics of the problem? (pp. 5-6)

It has been argued (and rightly so) that the reports that flourished in the 1980s were motivated by political conservatives to respond to educational prospects, constraints, and challenges. Authors of these reports apparently have failed to address the serious and inescapable issue of equity in spite of the widespread notion that America is a "color-blind" society. Jacob (1989) observed that despite this masquerading myth, "racism remains a serious and growing threat to America's future" (p. 5A). Public education has been Eurocentric, and has incessantly stressed Euro and Anglo concepts, values

and histories. This historical reality shows that public education has not fully responded to other cultures the way it should despite legal and legislative efforts made to ameliorate problems confronting minority group members, especially African-American males. It appears that special educators and other practitioners have been unable to resolve the multidimensional problems facing African-American males in school programs. In some quarters, this population has been termed the "endangered" species (Chavis, 1989). Whether this assertion is correct or not, special educators have failed to reach some of their at-risk students including African-American males. Problems confronting African-American males in school programs include (a) the theory of biological determinism which subscribes to the principle that "worth can be assigned to individuals and groups by measuring intelligence as a single quantity" (Gould, 1981, p. 20); (b) the use of standardized instruments as solutions (rather than as ingredients) for inappropriate classification, categorization, and placement (Anrig, 1985; Hilliard, 1989; Ogbu, 1988); (c) the negative perceptual assumption that they have "low" or "negative" self-concept because they are experiencing failure in school programs (Obiakor, 1990; Obiakor & Alawiye, 1990); (d) the insufficiency of realistic role models (e.g. African-American male teachers) who understand their history, symbols, cultural values, and learning styles (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 1987; Harvey & Scott-Jones,

1985; Obiakor & Barker, 1990; Staples, 1984); and (e) the lack of multiethnic education to foster cultural acceptance and diversity (Banks, 1986; Gay, 1988). It has become increasingly apparent that African- American males are unavoidably at risk. Clark (1988) noted that "the bulk of young people who are at risk are subjected to psychological genocide" and "robbed of self-esteem and the capacity to achieve" (p. iii). At-risk students, including African-American males, do not have minds that are tabula rasas. Baer (1991) reiterated that:

> We need to understand who these kids are. They have potential; however, they don't know it. They need what we all have to offer, but they won't believe it. In a way, they may want to fail because there is a kind of comfort in that. After all, it's what they know best. Failure is a restful place to be. Nobody bothers them much because they can't be expected to give or participate ... The crucial point to remember is that in spite of all these obstacles, these kids have all the potential that other kids have. (p. 25)

The above statement indicates that African-American males experiencing school failure are not beyond redemption. They are capable of challenging themselves in school programs when appropriate steps are taken to operationalize their self-concepts. Put another way, their self-concepts have to be seen as observable, describable, measurable, multidimensional, area-specific, and situation-specific variables. This alternative "operational" view of self-concept is useful in addressing complex problems facing African-American males in educational programs. This paper describes Project

Self-Responsibility, a project that involved three area schools (one elementary and two high schools) in Chattanooga, Tennessee. Project Self-Responsibility is a result of a public service to area public schools where they are in dire need of male role models, especially those of African-American descent. The major tenet of Project Self-Responsibility is the use of the operational self-concept notion to retain and uplift the dignity of African-American male at-risk students in educational programs. The particular project presented in this paper lasted for one school year. The sessions took place in the respective schools about once every two weeks.

Method

Subjects

Thirty-two male at-risk students were involved in Project Self-Responsibility. These students were selected by their respective School Guidance Counselors after consultation with their principals. Six of the students were in an inner-city elementary school without an African-American male teacher. They spent most of their time in the Resource Room directed by two female teachers (an African-American and a White assistant). These students had been identified as Seriously Emotionally Disturbed (SED) because of increased behavior problems which impede their learning and performance in school. As young as these students were, they have had many brushes with the law.

Eleven students (seven Whites and four African-Americans) involved in Project Self-Responsibility attended a predominately White high school with no African-American male teacher except the ROTC instructor. According to their Guidance Counselor, these students were chosen to participate in the project because they were not performing properly in their school work and were at risk of dropping out of school. Four of these students were athletes trying to juggle their education wiith sports, and sometimes employment. These students did not have serious behavior problems, however, they had apparent problems of time- management and goal-setting.

Fifteen students (fourteen African-Americans and one White) attended a predominantly African-American high school with about 70% White teachers and 30% African-American teachers. Among that 30% were three males (vice-principal, football coach and basketball coach). As it appears, only two of these males had direct teaching contacts with students; and they were coaches. The fifteen students performed from "good" to "best" in school work according to the Guidance Counselor. Their school performances notwithstanding, they still had problems in time-management and goal-setting skills which may in turn, lead them to drop out of school.

Overall, the thirty-two students involved in Project Self-Responsibility met the indicators associated with educationally disadvantaged students. According to Davis and McCaul (1990), and Pallas, Natriello, and McDill

(1989), these indicators include (1) minority racial/ethnic group identity, (2) poverty household, (3) a single-parent family, (4) a poorly educated mother/ father/guardian, and (5) a non-English language background.

Measurement and Intervention Strategies

As indicated earlier, the major goal of Project Self-Responsibility is to retain and uplift the dignity of African-American males in school programs using the "operational" model of self-concept. Since African-American males are at risk, and since most at-risk students "fall into a mode of learned helplessness" (Lovitt, 1991, p. 387), Project Self-Responsibility sees self-concept as a changing phenomenon which has the potential to be accurate or inaccurate, covert or overt, and different from situation to situation, and area to area. Key techniques for Project Self-Responsibility involve direct teaching, modifying the environment, employing intrinsic motivation, and helping to put failure in perspective.

For this particular project, the 24 Open-FormSelf-Concept Questions (Obiakor, 1990) were used. Borg and Gall (1989) disclosed that in open-form questions "subjects make any response they wish in their own words" (p. 428). The 24 Open-Form Self-Concept Questions reflect the major components of self-concept (self- knowledge, self-esteem, and self-ideal) as they affect the students physical maturity, peer relations, academic success, and school adaptiveness. In this project, responses were encouraged from students as

much as possible – no response was viewed as wrong no matter how inappropriate. See Table 1 below for the 24 Open-Form Self-Concept Questions.

Table 1
The 24 Open-Form Self-Concept Questions

A. Self-Knowledge Questions
1. What is your name? Do you have other names?
2. What can you tell me about yourself, your classmates, your teachers and your parents?
3. How are you similar with your classmates?
4. How are you different from your classmates?
5. How "good" a student are you?
6. How "bad" a student are you?
7. How "happy" a student are you?
8. How well do you understand yourself?

B. Self-Esteem Questions
1. Which name do you prefer to be called? In other words, which name pleases you?
2. What are the things that you like best about yourself, your classmates, your teachers, and your parents?
3. Why do you like yourself for being who you are?
4. Why do you not like yourself for being who you are?
5. How do you like yourself for being similar with your classmates?
6. How do you like yourself for being different from your classmates?
7. Why do you think that you are proud of who you are?
8. Why are you happy (or maybe unhappy) because you love (or maybe hate) yourself for who you are?

C. Self-Ideal Questions
1. How did your understanding of yourself influence your school work?
2. How did your love for yourself influence your adjustment in school or how you relate to your peers?
3. How did your love for yourself influence your hard-work?
4. How has your understanding of your classmates, teachers, and parents influenced your academic success in school?
5. How have your similarities with your classmates affected your efforts?
6. How have your differences with your classmates affected your efforts?
7. What is your daily schedule? Do you know that "time is money?" What exciting or unexciting have you done today?
8. What was your high point of this week? What was your low point this week? What have you learned about yourself that you are willing to change this week? What do you plan to do to change or accomplish next week?

Results

This project (Project Self-Responsibility) was not intended to be very structured. Participants were free to voice their opinions, and there was no right or wrong answer. The point was that African-American male at-risk students had the opportunity to control their environment in a much more non-threatening productive fashion. They demonstrated great enthusiasm and longer attention span. Their responses were intelligent and showed the high level of "common sense" of these students not usually appreciated by regular and special educators.

In questions related to self-knowledge, the students virtually knew who they were. They frequently asked about Africa, and why I came to the United States of America. Regarding the self-esteem questions, they valued themselves. They felt good about themselves. In some cases, they felt "too good" about themselves. The majority of the students involved in this project had self-ideal problems based on their responses. Even though the students had "high" goals, they were disoriented on how best to achieve them. Their responses indicated that they were not expending the efforts to achieve their goals. For example, most of the students spent too much time watching television, hanging out in the streets, and talking on the telephone. The students, however, responded positively when monetary values were placed on time.

The results of this project can be summarized as follows:

1. No student involved in the project dropped out of school One of the students in the elementary school progressed and moved into a regular classroom.
2. Students started developing decision-making skills. and began to take control of their problems.
3. Students began to rely on their capabilities while acknowledging their weaknesses.
4. Students understood that they were responsible for their own feelings and actions.
5. Students were able to realistically appreciate who they were, their classmates, teachers and parents.

Discussion

On television and around street corners, discussions have focused on developing schools or programs for African-American males. These discussions are not without merit. Dubois (1979), Kunjufu (1984), Marable (1990), and Woodson (1933) have noted the long history of miseducation of African-Americans. According to Baruth and Manning (1991), "African-Americans often face overt and blatant racism that has been handed down for generations" (p. 159). To respond to these problems, many innovative educational programs have been established of late. Project Self-

Responsibility has joined those programs which as Ascher (1991) pointed out, have tried "to inoculate African-American youth against often hostile forces in their environment, and to empower them as individuals and as members of a community to proceed along paths to success" (p. 1). Ascher added that "educational programs tailored specifically to the needs of African-American boys and youth are relatively new" (p. 1). This novelty makes it even more challenging because workable and unworkable strategies are tried on already over-loaded African-American males.

The project described in this paper was intended to help African-American males to be self-responsible, self-determined, self-reliant, and self-productive. The overall results indicated that the project's goal was achieved. The retention rate among all program participants was 100%. This goal was achieved using questions and intervention strategies that bellied operational self-knowledge, self-esteem, and self-ideal. One fact was apparent, that is, African-American males are capable of learning and making functional goal-directed decisions. Special educators and other practitioners should minimize the conscious and unconscious categorization of African-American males. Coming from disadvantaged environments does not conclude disadvantaged self- concepts. Special educators should be willing to invest the time needed to understand, test and teach these students so that they will be self-responsible and self-productive in a competitive society like ours.

The challenging question then is, can the cycle of African-American male unemployment, despair, poverty, irresponsible fathering and behavior be disrupted? It is unrealistic to think or suggest that one dose of a program like Project Self-Responsibility will cure the general malaise of the African-American male. All hands have to be on deck. The White community and predominantly White colleges need to be fully and practically involved in the education of African-American males, especially in the recruitment, training and retention of students and faculty. The African-American community should accept the responsibility and partnership in educating its children, and understand that racism alone is not the issue. An implicit implication of Project Self-Responsibility is the need of "Blacks helping Blacks." Quality without equity is as dangerous as equity without quality. Surely, the time to act is now!

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